Is He Right?

TO THE EDITOR OF BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD—*Sir:* When I'm dining in a restaurant and I ask for filet mignon, the waiter doesn't bring me hamburger steak. There is no reason why he should. If he did I would be decidedly irritated. Not that I have any prejudice against hamburger steak. But when I ask for filet mignon, I want filet mignon.

Now, why, when I'm buying a literary filet mignon, am I so often sold literary hamburger steak?

For example, when I buy a book of Mr. Walpole's, I think I'm buying a book saturated with England, steeped in Glebeshire, in Cornwall, or in that neighborhood forever sacred to the Duchess of Wrexe. I want to read about English people, depicted with a slight air of unreality, but so convincingly depicted in this way that one accepts it without question.

Now isn't it a bit hard when Mr. Walpole's novel deals with Russian persons and places? The name Walpole stands for one sort of thing. I buy his book and I get another thing—a quite different thing.

Similar is the case against Mr. Compton Mackenzie. The name Mackenzie on a book's jacket stands for a series of gorgeous, full colored word paintings of England and Englishmen. The painting is done on the grand scale, yet infinite and telling attention is paid to minutiæ. There may be splendid humor—witness *Carnival*. There may be cleverly done, animate pictures of the past, such as those in *The Passionate Elopement*. But there should always be these splendid paintings, arranged in series, with a vivid, poetic and fortuitous style linking them together.

Yet I have bought *Sylvia Scarlet*, a movie scenario of event after event, loose-jointed, written in the ordinary manner of Smith or Jones. Where are my paintings? Where is my style? I have bought another hamburger steak.

This constant experimenting by writers is hard on the reading public. It can't know what it is buying. Of course it may look before it buys, but that look doesn't really help much. So perhaps it doesn't buy books as often as it might. To tell the truth, the English novelists are the leading addicts of this experimenting, which may account for the fact that the American public buys English novels in smaller quantities each year

The picture, of course, has its reverse side. When one buys Mrs Wharton's novels, one knows what one is getting. That is also the case with Mr. Tarkington, Mrs. Deland, Mr. Joseph Lincoln, Miss Sinclair, Mrs. Stratton-Porter and Mr. Harold Bell Wright. We have bought Mrs. Wharton's book and we have got her calm, ordered analysis of human emotions, very finely and very clearly presented in flawless English. We have asked for filet mignon and been served with filet mignon.

The book buying public has been so much abused that some opportunity should be given for its case's statement. It has its rights. It pays its dollar and a half for a book, without which, after all, publishing could not continue. Which being the case, are not these experiments by writers unfortunate?

Artistic temperament to the contrary, why won't the author stick to his literary last? Or, if that can't be done, why can't he write different types of novels under different names? He can't annoy the book buying public too many times. The man who has ordered literary filet mignon doesn't want literary hamburger steak.

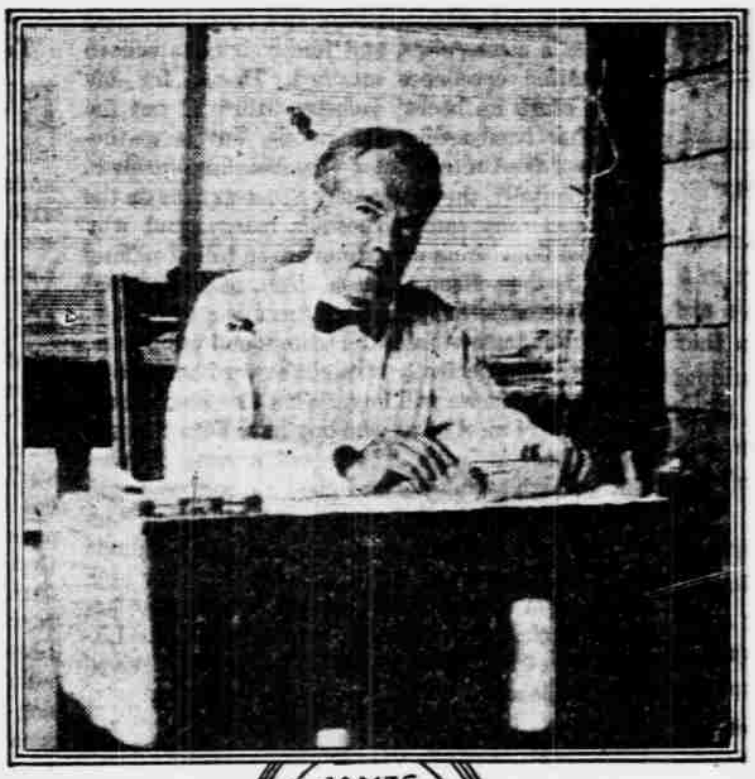
And he isn't likely to repeat his order.

JOHN L. B. WILLIAMS.

NEW YORK, June 20.

A third edition of Mrs. W. K. Clifford's novel, *Miss Fingal* (Scribner's), is now ready. William Lyon Phelps thought it one of the best novels of the last few years.

The Scream of the Jest



"CABELL is the biggest event in American literature in many, many years," says Mr. Burton Rascoe of the Chicago *Tribune*.

I had been reading Cabell for some time when I stumbled upon that sentence; I had even taken to corresponding with him; I confess the man interests me immensely—and flatters me (in his letters) that I may rise to overwhelm him with my abuse. He is, beyond a doubt, the best informed, the wittiest, the most fanciful of our novelists—and I have been debating, through the mails, with upward of forty-five, the leaders so-called; I find them, as a rule, about as diverting as any other forty-five, picked up haphazard, might be: lawyers or ranchmen or kings; I have for them no such admiration as I feel (at times) for the soldier.

But Mr. Cabell. . . . For six months past there has been war over him out in Chicago; and in Baltimore H. L. Mencken has issued a pamphlet advising all and sundry that Mr. Cabell has written "a number of books of a high and quite uncommon savor—books of a quality that is rare and delicate." True, Ben Hecht insists that "Cabell remains the sardonic professor mouthing in the boring rhetoric of the classroom"; and the London *Times* would off with his head as "one of the most pretentiously attitudinizing of American authors"—but we are not taking our cue from London, you and I, and who is Mr. Ben Hecht that we should listen to him?

Mr. Cabell is one of the few first rate literary craftsmen of our day; all the others—I must make rules, though I vow all truth a lie, to prove my quaint exceptions. When I say there is no writing in America, I do not mean it literally; I would preface my praise for one or two. . . . When I cry out against the stage, I would reserve a place apart for Mr. Cohan. "One prejudice," said Dr. Johnson, "is worth a dozen reasons." Reason is all very well for Mr. Overton and his "book reporters"; slaves of the Midnight Lamp, they go about, like Diogenes, searching for the Perfect Reader.

And so I give voice to my feelings—for I think what I feel. I am convinced that there is but one excuse for criticism: tilting has fallen out of fashion. Since we may no longer serve the Beauty we adore upon the fields of chivalry; quill at rest upon the paper, we do battle for her down the long lists of a season's books. Stemming as I do from Marlowe through Byron to Shaw, I batten on rebuke. "Give me, sir," said Dr. Johnson, "a good hater." I pray you, tread on my cloak where it trails at your feet!

But—saving your presence—I have my quarrel for to-day. "Why any author (Mr. Cabell, for example), should waste his time writing the memoirs of a heartless, selfish, penniless and conceited libertine" is, in the slang of the street, beyond the Portland *Journal*. (Why David was anointed king over Israel doubtless puzzles Mr. C. S. Jackson, the editor.) "Pity it is," the reviewer declares, "that some more elevating subject might not have been chosen." Pity it is . . . there is music in the phrase, echo of autumn rain upon the willow leaf, a grief that whispers the o'erfraught heart to bid it break. Some more elevating subject?

But do not bestir yourself. 'Tis within reach of my hand. On the advice of Mr. Hamlin Garland, I have recently adopted *The Son of Royal Langbrith*. "At forty, after her wifehood of three years and her widowhood of nineteen years, the inextinguishable innocence of girlhood, which keeps itself through all the experiences of a good woman's life . . ." &c. So Mr. Howells introducing Mrs. Langbrith. Elevating? Quite . . . and ridiculous. You cannot generalize to any purpose concerning women, and good women (I have known some of the best) are not necessarily Mrs. Langbrith at forty; girls are not necessarily good; and Eve, I take it, after the fall was most appealingly innocent of wrong. Innocence? My word, the wiser they are the better they know how to feign that innocence of which no good woman is ever conscious.

But to proceed; a half dozen pages later; speaking of marriage: "Was it for the nothing which it now seems that they were associated in the most tremendous of the human dramas, the drama that allies human nature with the creative, the divine and the immortal, on one side the bestial and the perishable on the other?" The bestial! And, mind you, 'tis the voice of the Puritan . . . speaking of marriage. I make no boasts concerning my chastity, yet have I failed to find anything bestial in human relations, no matter how intimate. We have no more in common with the bestial when we marry than when we eat; and if we are bestial when we eat—'tis not an elevating subject. I am a farmer raising pigs, and I swear that nature, working through them to procreate life, dignifies their lowly estate, lifts them as mothers far above the touch of such thoughtless phrases as are all too general with Mr. Howells.

But we digress. Let us return to Mr. Cabell. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on . . ." Did Shakespeare intend that sentence literally? Are we but walking shadows? the creatures of our fancies? Mr. Cabell . . . but read his books; they are food for thought as music is the food of love.

Mr. Weyl's Novel

THE CHOICE is Maurice Weyl's first novel with the exception of one which appeared in a trade journal twenty-five years ago and was, we take it, pretty well permeated by its environment. In a literary sense *The Choice* is actually a first novel and bears no imprint of the earlier trade mark. Although the heroine is a telephone operator the telephone exchange does not invade the plot. Mr. Weyl writes with unctuous deliberation, giving greater attention to the parts of his story than to the whole, evidently intending that the molecules shall weld themselves together, but they don't. With the result that the book is scrappy, though the first half is genuinely entertaining.

The stage is set encouragingly with humorous asides and provocative entrances, but when the characters begin to move doubt assails the reader. By the time they gain their stride, if they may be said to do so at all, doubt has become fear and fear in turn becomes discouragement. Structurally the second half of the book is regrettable. There is no real action and little to take its place.

Asenath McBride was the daughter of colorless parents—a father who found religion pleasant because the Bible invariably agreed with him, and a mother whose daily delight was a hopeful scrutiny of death notices. More colorful persons have been known to have these failings, but the truth about the McBrides is that these were their distinguishing characteristics. Mr. Weyl, wishing to emphasize Asenath's beauty and mistrusting the usual descriptive forms for beautiful heroines, likens her again and again to Madame Vigée le Brun's portrait of herself. The character of Asenath remainds us of Camilla in Elizabeth Robin's recent novel. She was one of the "silent people," and when she assured her friends that she was "dumb" they thought her merely modest. Was Asenath really dumb? That is the great enigma—and just to be horrible we will reveal all, as revealed to us by Asenath's husband of a year.

"Now he could see Asenath as she was; beautiful, affectionate, faithful, true, but limited intellectually. She had neither the mind nor even the desire for knowledge. She had good taste, almost perfect taste, in all matters esthetic, but, beyond the simplest abstractions, her mind would not go. And this was to be his companion for the rest of his life. This had been his choice."

The husband took it rather well on the whole. He crept up stairs and gazed at his incredibly stupid companion, and as he gazed felt the strength of his love for her newly born. She was his wife and the mother of his child. And he was humbly grateful.

The nicest thing about Mr. Weyl's book is the way he pictures inelegant persons trying to be elegant. We shall long remember May Wilson, for instance, who naturally called her head a "bean" among friends, but in unaccustomed circles managed to trip herself in time.

THE CHOICE. By MAURICE WEYL. Mitchell Kennerley.

Dark hintlings pervade the intermolecular ether to the effect that Irvin Cobb has up his sleeve a book on national prohibition. Here's to it's being a better book than Sam Blythe turned out on the water wagon.